DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 214 CS 212 841

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TITLE The Developmental Level Writing Program at Michigan State University.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Writing; *Developmental Studies Programs; Higher Education; Popular Culture; Program Descriptions; Reading Writing Relationship; *Remedial Programs; Writing Difficulties; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Michigan State University; Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

The developmental writing program at Michigan State University offers special attention to students who enter the university at a competitive disadvantage with respect to their ability to express themselves in writing. The primary goal of the program is to seek to empower students so that they will be able to express themselves in writing for the academy. An ancillary goal is to help the students gain the confidence necessary to prevail in their pursuit of a degree. The program is based on the premise that reading and writing go together, and that students benefit in multiple ways--as academic writers, as citizens and as thinkers--from addressing in writing major issues in American culture. Although the program does not differ in kind from the regular courses offered, it does differ in the intensity and close attention each student receives, for class size and faculty loads are smaller. In this way, instruction is individualized and a bridge of language and ideas is built that will carry the students into full participation in the culture that will be theirs to shape. (RS)

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The Developmental Level Writing Program at Michigan State University

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March 1991

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Comments for the CCC Conference
Boston March 21, 1991

The developmental writing program at Michigan State University offers special attention to students who enter the University at a competitive disadvantage with respect to their ability to express themselves in writing. Our primary goal is clear: we seek to empower students so that they will be able to express themselves in writing for the academy. Our ancillary goal: to help them gain the confidence necessary to prevail in their pursuit of a degree. Clearly these goals are related, for facility with language is a necessary coordinate with mastery of knowledge. Knowledge without language is ineffective.

Few of us are able to identify so fully with the dispossessed, the underprivileged, the powerless as Eugene V. Debs, who devoted his life to empowerment, to showing American workers how to claim their rightful place in American culture, to assert their dignity. He often asserted that, even if he had the power to do so, he would not lead workers out of their slavery, for if he could lead them out, then someone else could lead them back in. The only lasting change in their plight would come from their united efforts alone. They must do it themselves.

So it is with our developmental writing program. We as instructors do not show our students the correct way to write. Rather, we try to guide them in their search for their own authentic voice. They learn by doing: by reading to discover useful ideas and information--even meaning, by writing themselves in many forms, by reviewing the work of others, by considering

feedback from peers, by formulating a main point, by revising, by searching for additional information, by understanding the conventions of edited American English, by editing other students' work, and by polishing a final product. We do all this in small classes which allow individualized interactions between instructor and student. We cannot accomplish this at a distance. Debs declared in his essay "Labor and Freedom": "While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Our students are not criminals, of course, although they may have been taught to feel so. They are often, though not exclusively, from the lower class. And so long as they fail to develop effective ways to express their knowledge and ideas clearly and forcefully, they are not free. We do not expect faculty to identify so completely with our students as Debs did with the working class, but we do expect in the developmental program that we keep before us the awareness that "there, but for the Grace of God, go I."

We can empower our students only when we get close to them; we must reach the same conclusion Joseph Wood Krutch reached: "We are all in this together." That is not easy for academics, even those of us who come from working class backgrounds, for we may tend to see that our students differ from us, for we, after all, discovered the signs and words of acceptance that empowered us. We have succeeded in the same academy these students hope to survive--or even master. But we must guard against focusing on

differences for they can distort our vision. We search for things that bring us together.

Many of our students have lived narrow lives, whether they grew up in an impoverished or a wealthy ghetto. Many of our students are poor, though not all are. Many of our students are minorities, though not all are. Many of our students come from difficult social and familial situations, though not all do. Those from areas of poverty may have had very intense experiences, but few broad ones. And those from wealthy areas may have lived in splendid isolation. Neither may understand that we are all in this together, for they have been nursed on a flawed individualism that measures success or failure in individual terms alone.

In one way our "developmental" students are all alike. They share the experience of Failure. There is no way to alter the impact of being placed in a "developmental" writing program, although we try to do so.

Our students may conclude that they never will be able to write. In <u>other</u> areas they may feel competent, even powerful. Athletics. Mathematics. Science. Social interaction. In writing, however, they have probably experienced failure and likely accept that failure as definitive. We try to persuade our students that they are not failures, that they can write. We try to empower them by helping them recover ownership of their language, and by encouraging them to engage critically with themselves and with significant issues in American culture.

We believe they will grow as individuals as a result, but their success represents a social gain as well, for it extends our democratic ideals, our inclusive vision of one people governing themselves. It blunts the debilitating impact of class and race on a significant number of young people, and provides them the tools and understanding that can lead to influence and power.

At a practical level, we work from a common syllabus to achieve common objectives. Primarily, we want them to understand how to present information and a point of view in written form. We begin with reading and with personal experience and preserve both as links between self and other. We build bridges by showing our students how to use sources in increasing number and complexity. By Spring term we ask them to write research papers.

Let me turn to the mechanics of entry into the Developmental program. First: Placement. Entering students take a reading test and write an essay which we read and score. Both tests use MSU norms. If the combination of their reading score and essay score is low, they must enroll in DLWP. These tests help us identify students who need special, individualized attention to increase their ability to compete with other students admitted to MSU, with students whose preparation gives them a competitive edge.

Second: Structure. We begin our course sequence with the students' experiences held up to the mirror of other Americans' experiences as found in personal, autobiographical readings. We

use these reading first as inspiration. We lead our students quickly to the experiences of other Americans close to them: parents, brothers and sister, friends, and encourage them to use others' experience more directly in their writing. We encourage them to make judgments, to evaluate, and to use example and detail for support. From there we move to issues which contain a high personal content, such as sex roles or race in American culture, and require students to use sources outside their personal experience in their writing. The next step requires the use of more than a single source, and as we move through the year, we help them develop a most natural and human quality: the use of information to support a point we wish to make, a claim we wish to assert, a cause we hope to advance. Let me emphasize this point. It is a commonplace of American culture to use information in normal discourse to support a point we wish to make. All you need do to demonstrate this is to ask your students if they have ever heard the phrase "how do you know that?" Routinely, we appeal to authority or example, even if the authority is the local gossip, and the example tenuous or obscure. We do it, and students quickly <u>understand</u> when we point this out to them. It may take longer for them to <u>apply</u> that understanding.

Thus by the completion of the course, students venture forth in research missions of their own design, in search of information that they discover, in order to persuade an audience of their own choosing, that their judgments are sound and well

reasoned. We prepare students to cope with the demands of their major, and to express themselves with force and clarity in their culture. At least that is our aspiration.

We do this by relying on materials from American culture--the students' culture--because that augurs well for success. American culture may be complex and difficult to pin down, but it is not opaque to our students. They have grown in it. In contrast, imagine using materials produced by the Song Dynasty or from the Bhagavadghita. We would spend all our time searching for ways to make the cultures they express comprehensible to our culture. We have a better chance of reaching our students, of engaging them, with materials from their own culture. And we try to avoid the "current events", or "what I did last summer" approaches in favor of large, substantial, and sophisticated issues at the heart of American culture. We imply that this writing is not merely exercise, but that something real and valuable is at stake.

So it is that our developmental program is based on the sound premise that reading and writing go together, and that students benefit in multiple ways--as academic writers, as citizens and thinkers--from addressing in writing major issues in American Culture. At graduation we hope they will have a richer understanding of that culture, and can, as good citizens, write about it with sophistication, and thus help mold it. We demand of students that they read critically and that they write using the information and ideas, the meaning that their experience led

them to discover in a text. We offer our students substantive issues and offer no apology for insisting that they address them head on.

We continue to insist that students draft, revise, reshape, restructure, restate as they go about creating a finished product. We spend more class time intervening in this process than we did twenty years ago, and we go about it in a more systematic, self-conscious way than we did twenty years ago. We rely more on students helping each other through small group activities or editing sessions than we did twenty years ago, giving up some of our control over the classroom in the process.

Our techniques have evolved, but our course remains a central actor in students' attempts to develop their abilities to express themselves in writing. And we do so solidly within the tradition of higher education we experienced: we do it in a classroom, or working individually with students. We may no longer lecture about the rules governing the use of the comma, but we certainly will call a student's attention to misuse when it alters meaning. Our program has responded to new insights and new codifications of method, while we preserve a tradition nearly unique in American higher education.

Our experience has proved that materials from the American cultural tradition are critically important in moving students from preoccupation with the personal and parochial to a critical engagement, through reading, speaking and writing, with knowledge and ideas of lasting value. In fact, the recursive interplay

between the study of American culture and of writing enhances both.

The developmental writing program at MSU then, does not differ in kind, from the regular courses we offer. We use materials that raise issues and address important ideas from American culture. We may select shorter pieces at earlier stages in the course, but we include basic American documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, or Crevecoeur's "What is an American?", or De Tocqueville, as well as works by Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, and Kate Millet. Developmental writing does differ in the intensity and close attention each student receives, for class size and faculty loads are smaller, and thus we are able to individualize instruction and to build a bridge of language and ideas that will carry our students into full participation in the culture that will be theirs to shape.